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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ASHGABAT 001049

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, PPD

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [SCUL](#) [PHUM](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN GOVERNMENT CONTINUES TO DENY EXIT TO  
AUCA STUDENTS

REF: ASHGABAT 0938

Classified By: Charge Richard Miles for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The GOTX continues to create roadblocks for students traveling to Kyrgyzstan, including students of the American University in Central Asia (AUCA). The Minister of Education told parents and AUCA students on August 18 that the decision to not permit students to study in Turkmenistan was taken in conjunction with President Berdimuhamedov. This appears to put a nail in the coffin of Turkmen going to AUCA.

Prior to knowing this decision had gone as high up as the President, there was hope that higher level intervention might have solved the problem positively. Now, it appears that the best tack, in the interest of the students, would be to send them to alternative institutions, such as the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG). END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) On August 18, Minister of Education, Gulshat Mammedova, met with AUCA students and parents, and representatives of ACCELS. During the 45-minute, recorded meeting, Mammedova reiterated that students would not be permitted to study in Kyrgyzstan. She said that the government valued education. Therefore, those students who had not started their university education should know that the Turkmenistan Government was fully funding (full tuition room, and board) 175 spots for students at universities and institutes in Russia and 20 spots in Romania. (COMMENT: Many, if not most, of these opportunities are to study oil and gas-related subjects. END COMMENT.) For those second, third, and fourth year students, the Minister said, they had wasted their time studying in Kyrgyzstan. She said they should have known better. Male students that have not served in the military and do not study at an approved government institution will become open to the draft on September 22. The day before, during a meeting with AUCA students and parents, a Ministry of Education International Department official told the students they should be patriots and study instead in Turkmenistan. He also said that Turkmenistan does not need specialists in such "strange" areas as American studies, political science, psychology, or archaeology, but rather engineers, doctors, and scientists. Parents were told

that the Ministry of Education has specific concerns with students studying in Kyrgyzstan and that they would not bar students from studying at a similar American University in Bulgaria or the UAE.

#### BACKGROUND

13. (U) The USG has provided scholarships to Turkmen students to attend AUCA under the Turkmen AUCA Scholarship Program (TASP) since 2003. The funds are granted to American Councils (ACCELS) which administers a competitive selection process for scholarship recipients each year. There are currently 66 TASP scholars hoping to attend AUCA, including 11 new scholarship recipients and 55 matriculating students. Fields of study cover the gamut of liberal arts majors, from political science to journalism, English, and American studies.

14. (C) Over the years the Ministry of Education has expressed its displeasure with the program in various ways. Ministry of Education representatives have personally disrupted the testing and screening process. They have told students that AUCA degrees will not be recognized in Turkmenistan. (COMMENT: In general, their displeasure stems from their inability to decide who studies at AUCA and what they study. The government's unease about students studying in Kyrgyzstan is probably linked to fly-by-night educational institutions as well as Turkmen concerns about both extremism and political demonstrations in Kyrgyzstan and the possibility of young Turkmen bringing home radical political or religious ideas. With other USG-sponsored programs, the

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Ministry of Education has expressed similar concerns about the foreign influence on impressionable young Turkmen and seems frustrated by our continued persistence in running an independent, merit-based selection process. END COMMENT.)

#### THE EXIT PROCESS

15. (SBU) On July 22, the Ministry of Education announced new regulations requiring students studying abroad to obtain various government approvals prior to exiting the country. These approvals included a Ministry of Education stamp certifying the foreign institution as legitimate, and a certificate from the local draft board for male students. The Ministry of Education has consistently denied certification stamps for private foreign institutions, specifically noting that they will not certify private, commercial programs in the former Soviet Union. Migration Services has also haphazardly applied the exit requirements, some students traveling to Kazakhstan to study at the Kazakh Institute of Management and Planning (KIMEP) have been allowed to leave without Ministry of Education certification, and a few Russian passport holders were allowed to exit without certification to study at AUCA (although this has since ceased).

16. (C) On August 6, Post submitted a diplomatic note to the Foreign Ministry, expressing USG support for AUCA and emphasizing the institution's U.S. connection. On August 10, at the request of the Foreign Ministry, the Embassy submitted a dip note outlining the problems faced by AUCA students, and listing all students and their majors. The Foreign Ministry promised to help us with the matter, and on August 14 indicated to the DCM that the situation would likely be resolved positively in a few days. However, on August 15, the Charge was called in by the Foreign Minister to discuss the situation and presented a generally negative outlook on the future.

#### CHARGE'S MEETING WITH THE FOREIGN MINISTER

17. (C) Deputy Chairman and Foreign Minister Meredov began the meeting with the Charge with an explanation and a series of questions. He described his failure during the past 18

months to obtain Kazakh agreement to sign an agreement on bilateral educational exchange. This, in turn, had caused a number of "diploma mills" to spring up in Kyrgyzstan to attract Turkmen students, and Turkmen students were falling for this because the education offered was cheap. But, he said, the education the students would get and the diplomas that they would receive would be worthless.

18. (C) The Foreign Minister continued that Turkmenistan, as a developing country, needed trained people and President Berdimuhamedov had done a great deal to extend the period of required education in Turkmenistan and to send students abroad for higher education. Under the former President, no more than 1,000 students were allowed to study abroad on an annual basis. Now over 7,000 students do so. But the Government had two obligations: it had to be sure that the students going abroad were going to attend accredited institutions and would receive diplomas or certificates which would be recognized back in Turkmenistan and second, the Government needed to manage the situation so that the requisite number of engineers, doctors, lawyers, etc., would be produced to meet the needs of the society.

19. (C) Meredov then asked a number of questions about AUCA. Was it a USG institution? Who actually ran it? Were the Administration and the teaching staff American or Kyrgyz? What was the value of the scholarships which some of the students received from the USG? The Charge answered as best he could, admittedly drawing more from his experience in Bulgaria with the American University in Bulgaria than from a

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detailed knowledge of AUCA. Meredov suggested that there be a bilateral agreement, which could be an MOU or exchange of notes, to formalize the arrangement between the USG and the GOTX on AUCA.

110. (C) The Charge told Meredov that Turkmenistan was creating a very negative image for itself due to the Ministry of Education's mishandling of this issue. He understood the issue of diploma mills, but AUCA was a respected institution, one which had the sponsorship and the support of the USG. We had gone to considerable length to run a transparent and competitive competition to select the very best applicants from Turkmenistan to attend AUCA and had given a number of them full scholarships. We would not do this if we had any doubt about the quality of education the students would receive. And another large group of Turkmen students had been accepted at AUCA on a privately-funded basis. They also were being held up by the Ministry of Education. Students had been allowed to travel freely to be educated at AUCA over the past several years. Why was this issue being raised now, the Charge said, and if it had to be raised, why could it not have been raised earlier in the summer. Now the Ministry of Education is besieged by angry and confused parents and by fearful students -- all because of incredible misinformation coming out of the Ministry. And, the Charge added, many other students who had attempted to travel abroad to study in other countries had also been blocked. But, said the Charge, he wanted to focus on AUCA and, in particular, on the USG scholarship students. This was a USG program and it was being thwarted by the mismanagement of the Ministry of Education.

111. (C) The Charge said that he was not an expert on the educational exchange with AUCA. He did not know what might already have been done with regard to communication or agreement with the Ministry of Education on this issue. He would consult with his staff, would probably seek Washington advice and would get back to Meredov. Meanwhile, would it not be possible to let this group of students go while continuing to work on the issue? This would benefit the students and would also ease the concern in Washington and in other capitals. Meredov did not say that this would be impossible but his tone and demeanor did not provide grounds for optimism in this regard.

¶12. (C) The Charge turned to the idea of some sort of bilateral agreement between the U. S. and Turkmen Governments. He said he really didn't know if this was feasible. While the USG was very supportive of AUCA, the university was not a USG institution and the USG could not speak for it any more than he had been doing. The President of AUCA, an American, was prepared to come to Turkmenistan if necessary. Would this help clear the air? Maybe something in writing could be exchanged between the two governments regarding the scholarship students since this was a USG-funded program. He would explore this with his staff.

¶13. (U) In closing, the Charge made a personal plea to Meredov to help resolve the long-standing issue of the registration of the International School in Ashgabat. The Minister said, as he has many times before, that he would look into this.

#### THE UGRAD MISHAP

¶14. (SBU) On the morning of August 17, two Turkmen students who had been studying at AUCA were denied exit on a Lufthansa flight headed to the United States. These students had received State Department UGRAD scholarships for a one year course of study at a U.S. university. They were headed to the United States to begin their U.S. studies, but were told by Migration Services that they were AUCA students, and couldn't leave the country. When asked about the incident,

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Ministry of Education representatives seemed confused, and promised to address the situation separately. On August 18, Minister of Education Mammedova confirmed that denying exit to the UGRAD students had been a mistake and outlined a process to get permission.

#### STEPS TAKEN BY THE EMBASSY AND OTHER MISSIONS

¶15. (C) The Embassy has been aggressively working with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Migration Services, and the Ministry of Education to resolve these issues. The Charge and DCM have consistently raised the issue with their contacts, and will continue to do so. The Charge will meet with Minister of Education Mammedova to express our concern about the present situation. Both the UN and OSCE missions here have raised this matter at the MFA, and the UN representative discussed the problem of restrictive student exit regulations with the Director of the Institute for Democracy and Human rights. However, the UN admits that their approach "has not reached the level of action yet." OSCE considers this a freedom of movement issue, and therefore, has been actively responding to complaints by students. The EU has discussed the problem at their regular meetings. The British have given letters to their graduate scholars and have requested (to no avail) a meeting with the Ministry of Education. The French have very few Turkmen studying in their country.

#### A BACKUP PLAN

¶16. (C) Seven TASP students were able to travel to Bishkek before the new rules. It seems to make the most sense that they stay there until they complete their education. It appears that the rest of the 66 TASP scholarship recipients will not be able to travel to AUCA. Therefore, the Embassy is working with ACCELS, the President of the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG) and the Department to develop a plan to send the students to AUBG to complete their studies. We hope that AUBG would also be willing to accept the other non-USG sponsored Turkmen students studying at AUCA. Sending the TASP students to AUBG could require additional resources, but would be a natural outgrowth of our commitment to these scholars.

¶17. (C) We do have concerns about the male TASP students now

being subject to the draft. And they may get drafted in September, even if the students are accepted at AUBG for January 2010. This would mean that their education is delayed two years, or they may never get to attend university. Hopefully, we can work with the Department and with AUBG so that most, if not all, of them can start at AUBG in September.

MILES